

Human Trafficking: Psychology of Recruitment

Human trafficking victims are not
always abducted. Some are seduced

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Invisible Chains: Psychology of Recruitment

We have all seen the television documentaries. Human trafficking victims chained, handcuffed, and blindfolded. More commonly, however, human trafficking victims are bound by invisible chains. They are controlled through physical, psychological, and emotional coercion.

Many traffickers admit they get further with honey than vinegar. This is corroborated by research. Many trafficking victims have been seduced into their circumstances by traffickers posing as adoring suitors, and have stayed in their situation out of love for their abuser. Accordingly, the relationships between human traffickers and their victims often masquerade as consensual relationships of love and affection. These relationships are often out in the open, paraded around town right in front of citizens who fail to recognize the signs of deception, manipulation, and coercion that distinguish them from healthy ones.

Lisa Goldblatt Grace in “Understanding the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children” (2009) notes that while some pimps utilize forceful methods of procuring prostitutes, the most frequently used strategy is seduction.^[1] Similar to grooming techniques used by child molesters, the use of professed love and attention in the recruitment process is an easier method of manipulation than force or violence due to the strong emotional bond victims form with the offenders.^[2] This emotional attachment to the men they consider to be their boyfriends leads women to allow the offenders to pressure and persuade them into selling their bodies.^[3]

Regarding the impact of the seduction process on a victim’s values and principles, M. Alexis Kennedy et al. in “Routes of Recruitment” (2007) note that the manipulation of an exploiter who professes false

love and attention may pervert the victim's sense of decency and morality—leading to her decision to prostitute for him.^[4]

For those of us who prosecute these cases, these relational dynamics present unique and sensitive issues involved with working with human trafficking survivors - many of who do not present as the typical crime “victim.” This failure to acknowledge being victimized affects the dynamics of victim-law enforcement interaction, safety concerns, and counseling.

The “Pretty Woman” Syndrome

Is prostitution glamorous? Remember the movie “Pretty Woman?” Julie Roberts plays a character who is swept off her feet by a dashing handsome Richard Gere. She is wined and dined, made to feel beautiful and special. The movie ends with a marriage proposal from Gere, who has turned out to be her knight in shining armor. What is the occupation of Julie Roberts in the movie? We can hardly believe it when we reflect upon the plot. That’s right: a prostitute.

Selling sex as glamorous is not just promoted by Hollywood movies. The music industry causes its fair share of undue influence by promoting songs, music videos, and live performances showcasing famous rap music stars and their large harems of women, attempting to make the life of pimps and prostitutes appear alluring.

How can selling your body for money be glamorous? It isn’t. But many of the victims I work with will tell you it becomes easier once you do it once. The whole process involves a kind of brainwashing. You should see the photos law enforcement finds on the cell phones of trafficking victims. Photos of the girls posing with wads of cash, designer bags, and other tangible items of wealth. Photos of girls much too young to drink alcohol posing with a martini glass and shaker. Sadly, many of these girls enter into the sex trade when they are young and impressionable. 12-14 years old is average age of entry into the business.

And unlike Julia Roberts' character in *Pretty Woman*, a trafficking victim does not come home at night to a luxurious hotel room with a handsome man. Many of these girls are lucky if they are permitted to sleep on the floor of their pimp's motel room. Some are not permitted to come home at all unless they have made their "quota" – a designated amount of money.

The harsh reality is that for most of these young women, recruitment into the world of sex trafficking does not end with a marriage proposal. It ends in disease, violence, physical and emotional abuse, and often suicide.

The reality of human trafficking is a worldwide epidemic that can be addressed through education, and acknowledgment. Learning what trafficking is will help society address this insidious crime within our community. A crime that unfortunately really does happen right in our backyard.

[1] Lisa Goldblatt Grace, 'Understanding the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children', *The Link*, Vol. 7, No. 2, Fall 2008/ Winter 2009, pp. 1, 3–6 (p. 4) (citing Flowers, 2001; Spangenberg, 2001; NCMEC, 2002; Raphael, 2004; Lloyd, 2005).

[2] M. Alexis Kennedy, Carolin Klein, Jessica T. K. Bristowe, Barry S. Cooper and John C. Yuille, 'Routes of Recruitment: Pimps' Techniques and Other Circumstances that Lead to Street Prostitution', *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment and Trauma*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 2007, pp. 1–19 (p. 9).

[3] Jody Raphael, Jessica Ashley Reichert and Mark Powers, 'Pimp Control and Violence: Domestic Sex Trafficking of Chicago Women and Girls', in *Human Sex Trafficking*, ed. by Frances P. Bernat (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 88–103 (pp. 90–91).

[4] Kennedy et al., 'Routes of Recruitment' p. 7.